



Broadening the concept of Greek identity as an approach to facilitate immigrant integration processes

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Besides a devastating economic crisis, Greece is currently facing a growing humanitarian crisis unparalleled in recent times. The country, which constitutes a major entry point for refugees and migrants fleeing war-torn areas, persecution or conditions of extreme poverty, is struggling to offer adequate protection and even basic supplies to those in need. Only during the last nine months, according to [figures](#) provided by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 396,500 people have arrived on the shores of Greek islands; undoubtedly, a relentless increase compared to the 43,500 arrivals in 2014. Europe has finally realised that Greece alone cannot deal with the ongoing emergency and has proceeded to propositions for a responsible and fair burden sharing. The latter implies that states should jointly initiate and carry out processes of accommodating refugees (but excluding migrants deemed not in need of international protection) in their current structures. Looking specifically into the Greek case, it will be argued that a broader conceptualisation of national identity may be able to facilitate immigrant integration policies.

However, it is important to firstly point out that the idea of accepting the influx of refugees does not come easy in some European states and this is the reason why we have lately witnessed different stances on the issue. While Germany, for example, has vowed to receive 800,000 refugees until the end of 2015, the UK's pledge refers to 20,000 refugees over the next five years; an approach criticised as narrow and inadequate. While Sweden, in a symbolic but promising action, became the first country to accept 19 Eritrean asylum seekers from Italy under the new EU relocation scheme, Hungary built razor-wire fences. At the same time, [Cyprus](#) and Slovakia have expressed their preference for Christian refugees proving that the shared responsibility initiative, which seems fair and reasonable at first glance, will not remain uncontested.

Turning our attention to Greece now, it goes without saying that for the state there is a moral imperative to launch humanitarian operations and save the lives of those refugees and migrants who attempt the perilous journey to Europe. However, along with decent reception centres and services that will assist in the implementation of [resettlement](#) (outside the EU) and relocation (inside the EU) programmes, authorities should start contemplating ways of smoothly integrating refugees into Greek society. To give a brief account of current integration processes, the [UNHCR](#) stated early this year that '*integration prospects and related support for refugees are practically non-existent*'; limited access to employment, difficulties with family unification, lack of social housing as well as racism and xenophobia present to a large extent the reality of a dysfunctional system that marginalises refugees and diminishes their opportunities for success in

life. Although it is expected that once the economy and political situation stabilise some of these conditions will improve, it is far from certain that factors associated with cultural or religious issues will follow the same track.

Judging from the above, it is time for society to engage in a public debate so that it can reinvent itself or rather evolve through a broader conceptualisation of national identity. Starting from the point that human mobility is inevitable in a globalising world, multiculturalism should not be viewed as a threat; instead, the potential situations of crisis that it may create should be considered, as [Stanley Fish](#) puts it, '*an opportunity for improvisation and not an occasion for the application of rules and principles,*' although rules and principles, as parts of improvisation, can also be recharacterised. The latter perspective leads to a different conceptualisation of the nation and to a broadening of the concept of national identity, that is based not only on rigid, established structures but also on 'social contracts' negotiated and formed by people who share the same environment at a given period of time. Thus, a sense of belonging is more attainable if we perceive (and also accept) identity as the product of daily interactions that reconstruct past and present experiences but most importantly inform our future expectations of a shared position in society.

But, to be realistic, this is easier said than done. Taking into account, firstly, the political climate in the country where conservative and extreme voices raise concerns over the consequences of multiculturalism and, secondly, the tight bonds of Greeks with history, values and tradition, one realises that for some fanatics (meaning, mainly, single-minded persons in this context) the idea of a broadened identity is a red line that cannot be crossed. However, my basic point and assumption is that if national identity is approached as a continuous process that demarcates collective consciousness, it has the potential to narrow the gap between the 'hosts' and the 'newcomers' and diminish biases and discrimination. Today, where masses of people are forced to escape from their homelands, we need to leave prejudices aside and think in a more radical way so that we can effectively respond to new challenges.